

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY SETLAHARE

**"...In my father's house are many mansions...."**

Birthdays! It seems like the older we get the less important these landmarks of time become. But in our youthful years, the importance of a birthday party is foremost. Pre-teens always look forward to these annual celebrations of friends, games, gifts, ice cream and cake. Once we pass this milestone, we become impatient teenagers and seemingly can't wait for our next slow-moving birthday and to finally reach the legal adult age of twenty-one.

My twenty-first birthday was celebrated with a company of Marines on a hilltop in Vietnam. I had finally reached this plateau of adulthood and thought that my day would end up being just like any other day. However, a group of thoughtful Marines made my day special by making me a birthday cake. They found a canned, individual pound cake in a box of C-rations and topped it with icing made from the enclosed sugar, powdered creamer, and a little spit (just kidding, no doubt canteen water). They decorated the cake by placing a single match on the top and sang the traditional song. The memories of that birthday party on the hill, and the thoughts of that improvised cake that ministered to my self-pity, followed me all the way to Africa.

The phone rang and upon picking it up, I immediately recognized the voice of George Setlahare Melamu. The background noise from the taxi rank's payphone made listening difficult due to the deafening hustle and bustle of the weekend crowds. He said, "Hello Moruti (teacher)! Moruti, today I am too fine! Moruti, today is my birthday!" I congratulated Setlahare and assured him that we would sing Happy Birthday to him in church on Sunday. He quickly said, "Yes and Moruti everyone is coming to this place today!" I said, "That's great! Tell your family that we love them, we are praying for them, and we will see them in church on Sunday!" Before I could hang up he said, "Yes, and Moruti we are having cake!" Again, I expressed our joy for him, and he straightaway cut me off by saying, "Yes, and you must bring that cake!" I really didn't want to go to all that trouble, but I was visited by the indelible memories of that birthday party on the hill. What would my Marine brothers have done?

Ginger and I took Setlahare a cake, which was a little lopsided due to the heat. We found him at a relative's house, dressed in a hand-me-down jacket and tie. He thanked us profusely and insisted that we take a photo to remember his special day. We took Setlahare's picture holding the cake as his face displayed a sweet smile and childlike joy. We provided him with a duplicate of the photo which became one of his prized possessions. He showed everyone the picture of the cake that Moruti and Mama Boitumelo (Ginger) brought to him, and we doubt he missed anyone in the township.

A few weeks later I received another phone call from Setlahare. This time the joy was replaced with sorrow. While crying Setlahare said, "Moruti, you must come!" Without asking questions I went to the township expecting anything, having been called out after shootings and stabbings before. Upon arrival I found that Setlahare's shack had burned to the ground. While standing on the mound where the makuku once stood, I saw that our friend had lost all of his earthly possessions. His Bible was among the ash and rubble, and it was still smoking. **"Is not my word like a fire?"** (Jeremiah 23:29). I picked it up and pulled a half-consumed page from the Old Testament. It spoke of the splendors of the Lord's house that Solomon built, so I began to contrast the glories of the Lord with the present scene of this poor African's trial. Setlahare was crying while he said, "Moruti everything is finished now! My photo; my photo is finished!"

I felt the appropriate thing for me to do was to console my friend with prayer, but as I peered out of one eye in Setlahare's direction, I noticed that he had a big smile on his face as he wiped away the tears. I knew that our African friend was about to make a profound announcement. He said, "But Moruti, those flames could not reach my house in Heaven, Amen." I responded with a hearty, Amen!

Setlahare had emerged from his fiery trial as one of Daniel's friends; the smell of smoke unable to find a resting place on his faith. He realized that there is more than the 'here and now' having the 'hereafter' to marvel at God's grace in mansions above. Setlahare moved to his mansion on November 22, 1998.

Happy 247<sup>th</sup> Birthday to the United States Marine Corps!

Semper Fidelis!

*Chaplain Ron*



George Setlahare Melamu on his birthday. His Setswana name means, Big Tree. He was actually a Little Twig, with Big Faith.